

# **A Little Favor**

**Ayrith**

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# Summary

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## Description:

Zidane has a plan. As usual, Freya is not going to like it.

# 1. A Little Favor

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**Note:** Post-Game. A madain\_sari prompt similar to the others in a Sum of Memories. But I wanted to post this one and a couple others as standalone.

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“This,” Freya began, “is absolutely ridiculous.”

“Yes, but it’s worked once before,” Zidane pleaded as he struggled with the vibrating guest bedroom closet. Through the cracks of the door frame flailed hands and feet and a head with the worst case of helmet hair. Freya could sympathize a little. The Lindblum guard uniforms didn’t look comfortable, especially in the humid Lindblum heat. Incompetent as he was, it was probably difficult to maintain attention for several hours in fifty pound armor hot enough to singe bare skin.

Then again, if he hadn’t decided to take a nap on that shaded couch, he wouldn’t be locked in a closet.

Freya watched as Zidane gave a mighty heave and the closet doors clicked shut. He pumped his fist in the air, grinning like a fool. At her raised

eyebrow, he laughed and settled into a nearby chair. He was panting a bit. Unbelievable.

Any other time Freya would have heckled him about the growing flab on his belly, but at the moment, she was concerned with other matters. A moogle had dropped in on Freya early this morning when she was in the middle of being threatened with tasting Quina's latest food creations. The letter, oddly enough, had been from Zidane and had been unusually brief in its request that she meet him on Lindblum castle grounds. While she'd been all too quick to beat a hasty retreat in the name of her long time friend (or the preservation of her stomach), she also knew him very well. A seemingly innocent request from him could result in her spending an evening chained to a dungeon wall. On a good day.

Her intuition seemed to prove true when a chat with a guard on the ride down from the kitchens informed her that newly appointed Alexandrian Diplomat Tribal had been banned from visiting the upper levels. That this surprisingly petty show of power had been authorized by Queen Garnet til Alexandros was likely, considering the young queen had been busy sulking on the roof since dawn. And when Zidane had dragged Freya to a nearby dressing

room and made a ridiculous show of luring a sleeping guard in, she started getting nervous.

He had said he needed “help” with his Queen, but Freya had a feeling it was more than that. Zidane had a plan, and she was not going to like it.

“I still don’t see what role I play in all this,” Freya said, eyeing the sweaty pile of armor stripped at her feet with disdain. “Dealing with Alexandrian Royalty is not my forte. If you needed discipline, I’ve had the practice—” Freya said, thinking of her own troublesome monarch, “but I doubt that. Frankly, Garnet’s business has always been her own.”

Zidane rolled his eyes. “I already explained this to you four times,” he said, itching at the velvet suit he was wearing. It was a nice expensive suit and when properly fitted, made him look rather distinguished. At the moment though, with his loosened collar, his shirt tails pulled from his trousers and the large rip down the back of his coat from his tussle with the guard, Zidane looked more like a molested pin cushion. Not quite the dashing figure he had once presented two years ago, as lean and trim as a knife with that razor smile and lightning punches. To be honest though, the years

had done him good. He seemed a little mellower, a little calmer, and a lot happier. He wasn't lost anymore and Freya liked the improvement, even if his fighting skills had taken a dive for the worse.

“Actually, you didn't. Repeating ‘I need a distraction’ does not make it any more illuminating, no matter how many times you repeat it,” Freya replied wryly. “Besides, she's mad at you. Not me. Garnet is more than capable of making her own decisions. I would interfere why?”

Zidane peeked at her from behind his bangs reproachfully. “Don't buddies do each other favors?”

Freya crossed her arms. “I'm sorry, when was the last time you did me a favor?” He opened his mouth. “That didn't end up with me regretting it?” He closed it.

Freya looked up at the clock on the far wall, nails tapping. “You have 60 seconds to explain to me why I should help you, otherwise I'm leaving.”

Zidane made a face. “Come on, Freya. You love helping me out.”

“45 seconds.”

“Compassion?”



“40 seconds.”

Zidane looked thoughtful. “Because I’m hot?”

Freya’s face turned severe. “10 seconds.”

“Hey now! That’s not fair!” At her glare, Zidane began muttering, expression peeved. Obviously he was still as vain as ever.

Freya moved to pick up her things. “If that will be all then, I—”

“Wait.” Zidane raised a hand, looking solemn. The hairs on Freya’s neck stood on end. It was never a good thing when Zidane got serious. It always belied great insanity ahead.

“If you do this for me,” Zidane began, a slow smile forming on his lips, “I’ll forget all about the little ‘incident’.”

Freya blinked slowly, unwillingly intrigued. “... Go on.”

Zidane’s smile had turned that familiar razor-sharp. “Treno, seven years ago. You remember that little watering hole, *The Mermaid*? Me and you, fresh out of that stinking rat pit that was the gladiator games, high off our thousand gil win. I convinced you to take a shot every time that pervert

in the Synthesis shop looked down a customer's shirt—”

“*Ahem*,” Freya interrupted, her ears flushing. Of course she remembered. She had gotten thrashed. So thrashed that she’d chased the man by spear point all the way to the Zodiac fountain and had nearly succeeded in removing his manly bits before the Treno bodyguards had wrestled her to the ground. She’d spent a pretty night in a jail cell with Zidane perched on a stonewall laughing at her. She much preferred pretending that little ‘incident’ had never happened.

The offer was tempting. Too tempting. Freya’s eyes narrowed, part calculating, part suspicious.

“I’ll need some assurances,” she finally said. “I don’t take much stock in the words of a thief.”

Zidane waved her off. “What of the word of an Alexandrian Foreign Ambassador? I can’t just go about trashing the Alexandrian name.” Then, his smile turned wicked. “Besides, I’ve got a few other stories up my sleeve—”

He cut off when Freya aimed a kick at his knee. “Do you want me to help you or not?” she snapped.

There were a lot of things Freya liked to pretend had never happened.

“Okay, okay,” Zidane said hurriedly, arms raised in surrender, then smiled. “So is it a deal than?”

Freya knew she was going to regret this. “Fine.”

The man clapped his hands together excitedly. “Great! Now, please strip and jump into this suit.” He patted the armor fondly like it wasn’t the most disgusting piece of filth this side of creation. At her horrified expression, he rolled his eyes and gave an obnoxious, aristocratic wave of his fingers. “Don’t worry, I won’t look.”

Freya stared at the sweaty metal before her. It was rusty around the arm pits and neck hole. The armor padding there had turned *yellow*. There were *questionable stains* on the inside of the helmet.

The regret was now. Freya leveled a steely glare. “I don’t think so.”

Zidane ignored her. “Then, you’ll just saddle up to that elevator guard and call him off towards the hall.”

“Did you hear me?”

“Once you get him there, well, maybe improvise a bit. Wrestle him to the ground, maybe. Think of it as practice.”

*“Zidane.”*

“Let me just talk to Garnet!” Zidane pleaded suddenly, dropping to his knees with clasped hands. “Please. There is no other way to do this, I swear.”

Freya wanted to kick him. So she did. As he moaned and whined like a baby on the floor, Freya turned her attention to the stripped armor in pieces before the closet. She surveyed it critically. There was no way in hell she was wearing that... thing, not even for Zidane. But perhaps... she stripped the decorative pale yellow tassel and tunic from over the shoulders. With only a slight shudder of disgust, she draped it over her own shoulders. While it was ugly and had clearly seen better days maybe a couple years ago, it was relatively clean. It was large enough that when she removed her coat and doublet and tucked in to her waist, the result was acceptable.

By then, Zidane was lounging silently on the floor, surveying her handiwork. When she turned to him, he gave two thumbs up.

When she moved to kick him again, he bounded away and to his feet.

“You *owe me*,” Freya said simply. When Zidane made to argue, she picked up the decorative but sharp spear on the floor. That shut him up quick.

As she strapped the sash to her belt and tucked the tunic in place, Freya found herself casting impatient glances at the sulking ambassador. Truth be told, when Zidane had first approached her about his ‘plan’, she’d been a little curious. It had been at least two years since he had come to her with an actual plea for help. Instead, those two years had been filled with ranting letters about the idiocy of the head of the Council of Lords, the sheer boredom that was the seasonal galas, and how he was trying to avert the tragic return of fashion to the Brahne era of circus tents and powdered faces. She’d heard all the most outrageous gossip this side of the Evil Forest, but not a word of complaint about Dagger. (Unfortunately, she *did* have enough failed love poems about the ‘dark fathomless pools’ of Garnet’s ‘incandescent chocolate eyes’ to fill a book. Literally.)

So she had been surprised, to say the least, when she had discovered that Queen Garnet til Alexandros

seemed unwilling to talk about her erstwhile lover at the dinner yesterday evening. Or why Zidane had appeared after years of long distance, suddenly desperate for her help.

Zidane was still sulking pitifully. Freya gave him an expectant look. She deserved the answer. She was wearing this *thing*, after all.

“What started this anyway?” she asked, deciding the blunt approach was best. ‘Obviously whatever it was, its your fault.’ Zidane glared. “But I find it hard to believe that Dagger hasn’t forgiven you by now.” This was after all, the girl who tried to nurture injured Fangs back to health not a year ago. There wasn’t a bad bone in her body.

“Trust me,” Zidane said, rubbing his hair awkwardly. “She’s pissed enough. She left without a word and I haven’t heard from her in a week.”

Either he was being dense or really, really stubborn. Freya tried for patience. “And why was that, exactly?”

Zidane flushed. Several seconds of silence. “Uhh, it was a misunderstanding. Can I also say I’m an idiot?”

“Given.”

“Well, I—” he fell silent. Surprisingly for a moment, Zidane looked uncertain. He tugged at the sleeves of his shirt a little forlornly, but when he opened his mouth his words were oddly stiff and proper. “As you may know, there has been a lot of unrest in the Alexandrian populace. Our ambassadors are not popular with the other regencies.”

That was a politician’s answer and also a huge understatement. Brahne’s bloody conquest would forever scar Alexandria’s history and foreign relations. The only reason Burmecia had any contact at all with Alexandria was due to Freya’s own personal ties and Puck’s flippancy for the instruction of his advisors.

At her raised eyebrow, his expression turned sheepish. “For good reason, of course! However, it has had the unfortunate side effect of causing the council of Lords to put a lot of pressure on Gar—Dagger. They’ve been... pushing for a wedding date.”

Unsurprising. It was the hottest topic west of the Mist Continent. “And?”

“Frankly... there isn’t one.” Zidane took a deep breath. “And Dagger is upset about that.”

Freya stared. She had known there had been some serious backlash in the higher echelons of Alexandrian society after Zidane's very public reappearance. While the layman had cheered wildly for the 'happily ever after' of their young queen, officials in the higher levels of government were shocked and horrified. The incident served to draw out some of the underhanded political maneuverings that a few of Dagger's advisors had conducted in secret. When it became known that Queen Garnet til Alexandros was not in fact seeking a husband as some Alexandrian officials had suggested, already strained relations between the smaller and newer principalities of Lufenia, Fynn, and Amur had gone cold. Though ties with Lindblum were still strong, Alexandria was teetering on the brink of isolation. Their trade was suffering for it and so was the economy.

All too soon, Dagger and Zidane's happily ever after was over. Dagger was forced to step up as ruling monarch and effectively clean house. Zidane was quietly swallowed into the governmental machine, and for that first year, Queen Garnet had set about fixing the mess that was her kingdom.

Things had been slowly improving for Alexandria over the last few years. A smart



investment into coal and precious metals did a lot to open up negotiations with other principalities, particularly Amur and Fynn, which had no such natural resource. Still, particularly among the Alexandrian nobility, there were those that still stung with the humiliation of that day. Worse, ties had been severely damaged when Garnet was forced to remove a handful of officials from their posts.

Things may have gone a step toward fixing internal relations between Garnet and her council if the entire reason for the political mess, the marriage between Queen Garnet and her heroic young lover, had taken place once the dust had settled down. But it hadn't. In fact, two years had passed and not a word had been heard about plans for the wedding, much less the anticipated date.

All sorts of rumors had run wild, but of the all the crazy theories and speculations, only one had seemed even remotely reasonable to Freya. That was the rumor that a delay of the royal wedding was not due to hesitancy on the part of the Queen, but on the part of her newest, and most promising young ambassador.

And as Freya watched Zidane tug anxiously at his coat sleeves, it seemed that the rumors might be

true.

Zidane had been commitment phobic most of his life. It came part and parcel with being a philandering fop. That much had always been obvious to Freya. But Freya also suspected that if Zidane was hesitant to tie the knot to the love of his life, there was more to it than that. This was the girl that he had chased across continents for, after all. Perhaps he was insecure. Perhaps he was afraid. Still, it couldn't be the job. Zidane could handle pressure. He'd saved the world, for Rei's sake. If he'd been afraid of responsibility then, they'd all be dead.

No. Zidane was not a coward. He was a martyr.

"You are worried about something," Freya observed.

A humorless smile curved his lips. "I am."

"That's not like you."

"I know. Sounds crazy, right? But..." Zidane ran his hand through his hair in frustration. "I really don't want to mess this up, Freya. I can't."

The Burmecian studied her long time friend for a long second. Then, she decided to have a go with her

instincts.

“You know,” she said at last, a large part of her hoping she was wrong, “if you were going to act out the purpose Garland had designed for you, you would have done it three years ago.”

Zidane had been staring out the window, but at her words he went rigid and whirled around to look at her. His eyes were wide with shock. Freya felt a sinking feeling in her gut.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” Freya prodded gently.

Zidane recovered. But instead of laughing it off or making a joke of it like she slightly hoped, he covered his face with a hand.

“Am I that obvious?” he asked softly.

Well, now she had her answers. It didn’t feel very satisfying. Freya sighed. “No. I didn’t know for sure. But I know you and I know what seeing Kuja’s final moments did to you.”

The thought seemed to weigh him down. Zidane walked slowly to the chair and sat down in it. His hands shook a little as he raised them for inspection. This time he did laugh, but it was high and empty. “I know I’m probably being paranoid. I know it’s been

three years. But we just don't... know. We don't know what kind of genes Garland implanted in me." He paused.

"Sometimes I wonder if Kuja was really all that different from us. Me. He was just a tool trying to be more than his purpose. Anyone would want that. He just couldn't do it. He could never be more than what he was. And it makes me wonder-what if Kuja's madness was just... part of the design? I was designed with the same purpose in mind. Who's to say I won't turn out just like him?"

When Zidane looked at her, his eyes were bleak. Tortured. "I will always carry that with me. It is in my blood. It is in my genes. And if I have children..." He didn't finish. He didn't need to.

So these were the scars that Kuja had left him. His legacy. Irreparable damage to what Zidane had valued most—a pride and belief in who he was.

It pained her. More than he would know or even understand. He, who had been a rock in the storm of her insecurity, was suffering from the horror of his birth. Worse, she had nothing to say about it. No advice she could give. She wouldn't lie to him and say things would be fine. She couldn't even say he was being overly cautious, because the thought had

also crossed her mind. She could promise to kill him if he ever went out of control, and she would follow through with it too. But she couldn't say it out loud. Not yet. The possibility of it was still too real.

Still, this was Zidane. He had been born with more confidence than was healthy in a person. He couldn't be afraid to walk forward, not after everything.

Freya sighed. "You can't operate your life on what-ifs, Zidane."

"I know," Zidane replied, looking up at her. His eyes were pained, but she was relieved to see a bit of determination as well. "That's why I want to talk to Garnet. Why I'm here."

More than any other, Freya knew what it was like to run away from the truth. Hadn't that been what she had done for the last several years, before Zidane beat some sense into her? There were some things in life that were inevitable. You couldn't change the way you were born anymore than you could ask someone to remember you, to love you again. Life went forward. Sometimes, the only thing you could do was stand and face it. And hope that others still stood beside you.

As Freya stared at her long time friend, she put to thought what she had known in her heart all along. She would be there. She would always stand by this insane, aggravating, monkey tail, even if it killed her in the process. He infuriated her on so many levels, and yet he also got her in more ways than she could count. He was the only one who had stood with her in the rain when she'd felt homesick and alone. The only one to tell her to knock it off when she'd been too self-pitying to see her duty anymore. Following him had been the most irrational decision of her life. She'd gotten into more bar fights at his side then the years she'd been of drinking age. Her involvement in his crazy quest to save the world was almost entirely his fault.

But she'd never regretted it. Not once then. Not now.

But she wasn't about to tell him that.

"I'm only going to repeat this once," Freya said with resignation when the silence got too deep. Face entirely disgruntled, she reached down and slide the helmet off the armor pile. 'This,' she said, holding it up, "is ridiculous."

Zidane smiled. It was a little weak, a little sad, but she'd have to settle with it. For now.

“But I’m still hot, right?” he jokingly called after her as she headed for the stairs.

Scowling, Freya slammed the helmet over her head. “Don’t push it.”

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